SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES - INTEGRAL TO MULTI DOMAIN WARS

Before evolving a conceptual framework, structures, role, organisational and operational effectiveness and efficacy of Special operations Forces (SOF) in the future nature of wars characterised by Multi Domain warfare (MDW) , it will be prudent to comprehend both MDW and Special Operations in the Indian Context.

Multi-domain battle is a concept designed to overcome the adversary's integrated defensive capabilities, avoid domain isolation and fracturing, and preserve freedom of action. The SOF must be able to penetrate adversarial defenses at a time and place of our choosing, in more than one domain, by opening windows of domain superiority to allow maneuver inside the adversary's integrated defense. The rate and speed of current and future world events will not allow the time to synchronize federated solutions. In order to present the enemy with multiple dilemmas, SOF must converge and integrate multi-domain solutions and approaches before the battle starts. The need is to become sensor-shooter agnostic in all all platforms, and maintain a common operating picture.[1]

The MDW concept, principally involves responding to a set of strategic-military *and* operational-tactical concerns, which are: -

- How to deter the escalation of violence, defeat adversary operations to destabilize the region, and turn denied spaces into contested spaces should violence escalate?
- How to manoeuvre from contested strategic and operational distances and with sufficient combat power in time to defeat enemy forces?
- How to conduct deep manoeuvre by air, naval, and/or ground and special forces to suppress and destroy enemy indirect fire and air defense systems and reserve forces?
- How to enable ground forces to defeat the enemy in the Close Area?
- How to consolidate gains and produce sustainable outcomes, set

---

[1] Multi-Domain Battle The Advent of Twenty-First Century War- NOV- DEC 2017 Gen. David G. Perkins, U.S. Army

conditions for long-term deterrence, and adapt to the new security environment?[2]

The multi-domain battle concept is expected to integrate three key areas, organizations and processes, technology, and people. Changes in organizations and processes will be designed to provide different and better-focused Army tools to joint forces to overcome loss of superiority or parity in certain domains, particularly on land along our disputed borders, air, sea, cyberspace and internal security challenges. The major domains of warfare remain unchanged, it is the simultaneous, non linear exploitation of all domains in many battle spaces which changes the dynamics of future wars and hence the imperative to build cost and combat effective capabilities.

[2] *Multi-Domain Battle: Evolution of Combined Arms for the 21st Century 2025-2040, Ver 1.0, Army Capabilities Integration Center (ARCIC), U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, Oct. 2017,*
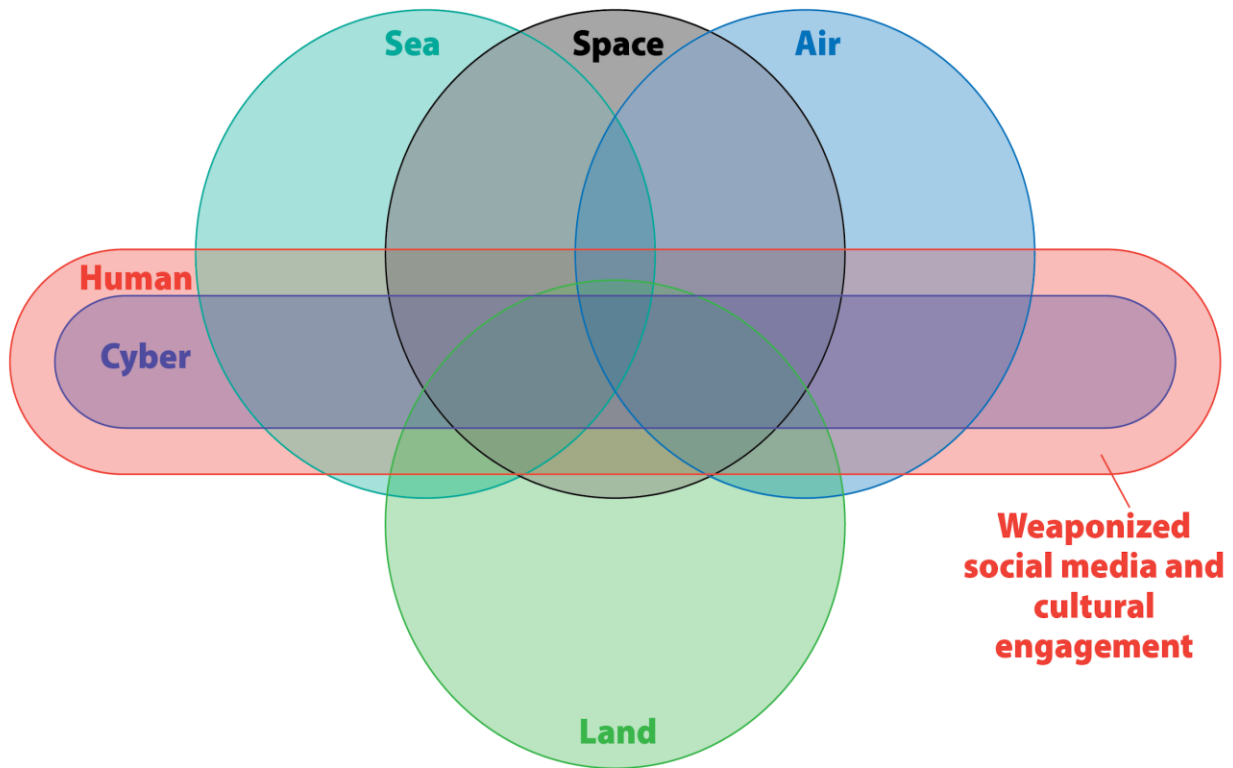
Figure. Multi-Domain Battlefield (Graphic by Arin Burgess, *Military Review*)

The nature of war has been and will remain an act of imposing one's' will on the adversary. However, the character of war i.e how future wars will be waged and fought has undergone a change due to numerous geo-political and socio-economic factors, technological advancements and military innovations. Future conflicts are likely to involve states or a state-sponsored actor as one of the participants of the conflict. States will also predominantly determine the spectrum, location and duration of conflicts. The last major driver of change that has had the foremost impact on character of war and the future operating environment is technology. Technological developments including artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, data analytics, additive manufacturing, robotics, unmanned weapon systems, nanotechnology, quantum computing, brain-computer interface, bio-technology etc are rapidly changing the way future wars will be fought. Arguably the most important potential technology of all is AI. AI would overcome the four challenges of data processing – scale, speed, complexity, and endurance – necessary to analyze the

increasing data from connected sensors. This will enable unmanned systems to have enhanced mission duration & effectiveness, reduce operating costs and risks to military personnel. Advancement in AI will also enable development of other complex technologies including autonomous systems, additive manufacturing, biotechnology, manufacture of advanced materials etc.

The security challenges for India can no longer be defined and definite, as these are likely to be hybrid, conducted in many battle spaces by multiple means driven by a collective ideology , plausibly without any direct attribution and without any overt physical military application of combat power ab-initio. A collusive or collaborative threat from both China and Pakistan is a probability which India should consider seriously. However, China mindful of its national and economic interests is not likely to overtly either support or collaborate with Pakistan. In the event of a China threat, Pakistan will only be too willing to support it's all weather friend China and a collaborative threat from Pakistan would be imminent, as it takes on a mightier India preoccupied with China along the Northern Borders. Hence, it would be prudent to conclude that during a future Indian military conflict with China, Pakistan will come to China's military aid but reverse may be likely but not a serious threat.

A two front war is not an option for India and hence it is an imperative that India has a credible war prevention strategy with China and a war waging strategy / proactive strategy against Pakistan, mitigating a collaborative threat or a two front war. The nation has to prepare for a war in all its dimensions and intensity from small wars to space wars, hybrid in content and possibly collusive and collaborative in context. India's security concerns must match with the apparent dichotomy in the Chinese policy pronouncements. It should also be based on its own core-interests. Chinese declared military strategy does not rule out 'Local Wars Under Information Conditions' and such local wars, as many analysts believe, can

happen in China's periphery. India should not fail to see that in South China Sea and East China Sea, China is resorting to a show of force to assert its territorial claims. India should anticipate China's indulging in similar show of force to assert its border claims against it, at an opportune time, Doklam is an indicator. In effect Indian armed forces should be present relevant and future ready. As the future security challenges are in multi domain India needs to build cost and combat effective capabilities and SOF will be the ideal start point.

Wars in today's context cannot be fought with outdated organisations and structures, wherein the Army, the Navy and the Air Force conduct operations in a linear stand-alone mode, with coordination and cooperation dependent on personalities. War is a joint endeavour, wherein all elements of national power and all resources of the union are synergised. This truism is even more relevant in the present context, as warfare today is a complex phenomenon likely to be waged in the multi-dimensional and multi-domain space. This complexity will increase in the future. The reasons include high technology, the nature of modern war, new threats and challenges and the reality of nuclear weapons in the arsenal of our potential adversaries. Consequently, a SOF and a joint force, which acts in an integrated manner, is not just desirable but an imperative. The complexities of the future security environment demand that India be prepared to face a wide range of threats of varying levels of intensity. Success in countering these threats will require skillful integration of the core competencies of the service specific SOF into an integrated force structure. However, reorganisation by itself will not succeed in achieving such integration. What is also required is a change in mindset, a change that makes every soldier, sailor and air warrior feel that he is a member of the Indian Armed Forces and not just the Indian Army, the Indian Navy or the Indian Air Force. This is best achieved by first integrating the Special Operations Forces (SOF), a force which is by far the most battle hardened and combat rich in the world having a proven record of success under the most challenging of situations. The SOF is not only a force multiplier but also a game changer, a force best suited to adapt to future multi domain warfare in the Indian context.

What are special operations, these can be defined as "*Unconventional military*

*operations,undertaken in a hostile or politically sensitive environment, to achieve political and military objectives at national, strategic and operational level and to safeguard economic interests. Their arena extends the complete spectrum of conflict and ranges from direct action to covert and clandestine operations. **These are undertaken mostly in concert with other elements of national power**"*[3] As these operations have international and national ramifications, it is essential to create an appropriate political understanding. The national polity needs to comprehend the options and the associated risk sensitivity compared to out of proportion impact and limited escalation dynamics. As India has grown in stature and economic power, it will become more and more vulnerable to unconventional and terrorist threats on its nationals and assets around the world. It is now an imperative to synergise the SOF under a single command to meet future challenges. The structure of SOF is a major indicator of a nation's will and capabilities to safeguard its interests, the capability to project hard power and political signalling.

The recently released 13 page Land Warfare doctrine amplifies the SOF employment. Quote ' **Special Forces Capability** - Special Forces shall be equipped, structured and trained to ensure their application in *multiple employment opportunities for exponential gains*, to achieve our military objectives. Their equipment profiling, standards of training and employment strategies must form a vital component of our overall deterrence capability, both in unconventional/ conventional domains.'[4] further stating that the '**Force Projection Capability**-India's role as a regional security provider mandates a force projection capability to further our national security objectives. *A Rapid Reaction Force comprising Integrated Battle Groups with strategic lift and amphibious capability will be an imperative for force projection operations.*'[5] However, there appear obvious contradictions in the signals emanating from the Armed Forces and the MoD on the proposed restructuring of the SOF, with the latter biased towards raising a Special Force Division capable of effectively executing more surgical strikes and the armed

---

[3] http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs
[4] Indian Army Land Warfare Doctrine 2018
[5] Ibid

forces wanting a 360 degree focus on structuring and employment of Special Forces in critical missions at the Strategic- operational levels of war prevention and war fighting.

The Land warfare doctrine goes on to simply but logically highlight the security environment, concerns and the nature of future wars. India's security concerns are impacted by a dynamic global and regional security environment . As India transforms from an emerging and rising power to a risen responsible power , it will need credible military capabilities to project military power, assist friendly foreign countries in times of crisis from unconventional threats and HADR. The continuing proxy war with Pakistan, the ever increasing and omnipresent threat from terrorists, the imperative to safeguard our national interests and assets dictate that we enhance capacities and build capabilities to face future threats and challenges. Future conflicts will be characterised by operating in a zone of ambiguity where nations are neither at peace nor at war - a 'Grey Zone' which makes the task more complex. Wars will be Hybrid in nature, a blend of conventional and unconventional, with the focus increasingly shifting to multi domain Warfare varying from non-contact to contact warfare. Non-Contact and Hybrid domains of conflict are now being integrated into the conventional and sub conventional realms and could be non-declaratory and non- attributable in its execution, a characteristic of Grey Zone Warfare that needs to be catered for.

Indian Armed Forces would have to be prepared for multi-domain battles with varying intensity and duration. These would include sub- conventional conflicts involving radicalized proxies and limited use of latest technologies to conventional conflicts of varying scale involving long duration non-contact phase, hybrid warfare, under an overall nuclear overhang. Information warfare including cyber, psychological and electronic warfare resources will be increasingly employed both during peace and war. Conventional conflicts post 2030 will gradually see the use of networked artificial intelligence supported stealth unmanned systems in land, sea and air domain, precision guided hypersonic weapons, long range high energy weapon systems, space based sensors and weapons, to name a few. These advanced technologies would be fielded by not only major but regional powers as well. This construct dictates that the nation build adequate and appropriate capabilities especially so in terms of SOF.

At present each service has its own SOF which have grown over the years. These are service specific and more often than not, there is competition and conflict of interests, rather than cooperation and coordination, be it their roles and tasks, equipping, training and command and control.   Existing SOF of the Armed forces include nine Parachute (Special Forces) Battalions and five Parachute Battalions of the Army, an 800 strong Marine Commando Force (MARCOS) organised on the concept of the US Marine SEALS and a 1000 strong IAF Garud. The NSG (SAG) and the Special Group manned and led by the Army for internal security and hostage rescue are under the MHA.These are elite forces, where every man is a volunteer, highly trained and motivated. This force is among the most battle hardened and combat rich force equal to if not better than the best in the world. The SOF are both force multiplier and substituter. These forces provide the theatre commanders with low cost high effect options to target high value military objectives in depth areas, thus giving the much needed strategic and operational reach during war. SOF are assigned missions at the strategic, theatre and operational level and tasked to execute direct action, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance tasks during war to delay, disrupt and destroy high value targets in depth areas. During peace they are mandated to execute CT and CI operations, special reconnaissance, hostage rescue, capability building of Friendly Foreign Countries, and above all, training for war. The recently demonstrated capability 'Ex Bahubali' by the Indian Air Force of lifting nearly 500 tonnes in a single wave is an apt testimony if required that India's SOF have the capability and ability to intervene with a substantial force in its areas of interest.

What is lacking is formal structures to optimize the potential of the SOF. It is an imperative to structure, equip, enable and empower our Special Forces to be effective contributors to the future MDW challenges. These are cost effective forces with high payoff and a high degree of assurance of success. In 2012, the Naresh Chandra task force recommended creation of a Special Operations Command (SOC), Cyber and Space Commands. With the Modi led NDA government demonstrating an urgency and resolve to address National Security concerns, it was hoped that the three commands, as recommended will be finally sanctioned, paving the way for an effective command and control structure and the much needed jointness and synergy among the SOF. The Government for reasons not known has shied away from exploiting this force multiplier and decided to raise a

Special Operations Division (SOD) under a Major General/ equivalent officer, which is at best a half measure and will be detrimental to effective employment, deployment and exploitation of SOF. A major weakness in this interim arrangement is the lack of a lean, mean, agile and versatile joint force under a single commander empowered and keyed in to the national decision making apparatus . This can only be achieved by raising a SOC. The SOC should be structured and organised as a truly integrated tri-service command with integral lift capabilities.

The tasks assigned to SOC during war would be to secure/destroy high value targets in the strategic domain and operational depth in furtherance of national military objectives. During peace, or rather no war no peace the SOC will be the first responder to any emerging or impending threat to our national interest in the region. The scenarios for its employment could include hostage rescue of Indian nationals and diplomats, evacuation of Indian nationals, reinforcement or assist in evacuation of United Nations Peacekeeping Missions, assist FFC from threats by inimical elements within, albeit on invitation, assist in HADR missions in the region and beyond and capacity building of Armed Forces of FFC. An empowered SOC will also be a credible 'threat in being' contributing to war prevention. Given the envisaged roles and tasks the SOC has to have a direct access to the national decision making body (CCS) in times of crisis and strategic missions. The national security structures and the SOF should prepare to counter threats in the multidomain warfare, linear wars now being only a subset of multidomain wars. The SOF are not only agile but also most suited to adapt to future security challenges. The role of the SOF to meet and mitigate these threats that undermine India's strategic interests needs to be refined and defined.

 Another major implication of the future operating environment is the necessity to accord higher priority to information warfare and develop suitable concepts that fully utilize all its capabilities.   This will enable, quickly establishing dominance over the adversary in any future conflict. Large investments would also need to be made to develop new technologies, in conjunction with the civil private industry, as most of these technologies are dual use. This will entail framing suitable policies for increasing interface with the civil industry. The Armed Forces would also have to assess the impact of new technologies especially as they would increase transparency of battlefield, precision, range & lethality of engagement. Thus, over

the long term, existing manpower levels may need significant reduction so that adequate funds are available for capital acquisitions. However, sub-conventional conflicts will continue to be manpower intensive in the coming decades. This is primarily because suitable technologies that will enable better force effectiveness with minimal collateral damage, will take considerable financial investments. Battlefield transparency and speed of decision making by utilizing AI will reach phenomenal levels, thus posing cognitive challenges for armed forces relying on human manned legacy systems. Unmanned systems that are autonomous with precise and intelligent targeting capability would require that own forces must be comparatively smaller in size, task oriented, highly mobile & with decentralized decision making. This will enable them to disperse and concentrate as per operational requirement. This is where the SOF will be critical and crucial to operating in the multi domain battles. Military leadership challenges will be posed by speed of maneuvers, multiple domains in which operations will have to be conducted and 24x7 nature of operations. In the absence of contact leadership, morale of troops due to the numerous battlefield challenges will also be impacted. Leadership challenges will again dictate that Special Operations capability be exploited as these will be the first responders with higher probabilities of success in high risk missions likely to manifest in MDW.

WORDS - 3061

Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia, PVSM, AVSM, SM (Retd)

Views Expressed are Personal